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LADIES
ON THE
INDECENCY
OF

Appearing at IMMODEST PLAYS

No Pardon vile Obscenity should find,
'Tho' Wit and Art conspire to move your Mind, POPE:

The Stage might be made a perpetual Source of the most
noble and useful Entertainments, were it under proper
Regulations. SPECTATOR, Vol. II. No. 92.

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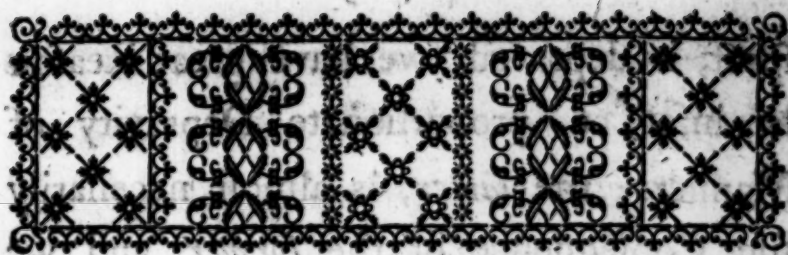
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AN
ADDRESS
TO THE
LADIES.



It has often, I think, been observed, that the Genius and Complexion of a People, are to be collected from nothing more accurately, than from the Nature of their Publick Diversions:—Some Degrees of Justice, the Maxim certainly carries with it, and therefore, where the general Taste of a People, in this Respect,

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spect, is depraved, we have great Reason to infer, a proportionate Depravity of Manners; the *latter*, is almost necessarily the Consequence of the *former*, and we find from every Day's Experience, that Errors in Judgment, are but too generally productive of Errors in Practice.

How far the *Stage* in Particular, by due Restrictions, might become subservient to the Interests of Virtue and Morality, is a Point I shall not at present discuss, nor shall I enter the Lists with those, who with more Ill-nature than Judgment, affirm, that a Theatre is the Bane of a Nation, and that Plays, without Exception, are absolutely subversive of Decency and Good-Manners:— Disquisitions of this Sort, I shall entirely wave, after observing, that Calumnies of so general a Nature, are always unmeaning and self-confuted.

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The Thinking and the Dispassionate, as well among the Antients as Moderns, have pretty generally allowed, that the Stage is a most instructive School, and, under proper Regulations, conducive to the best Purposes:—This then I shall lay down as an Axiom, and therefore, all I may hereafter advance, is only to be understood, as respecting *Indecent Plays*, which, to speak with Dr. Swift, *are the Scandal of our Country and Religion.*

Now as Plays are designed for the Amusement of the many, and as it is the Taste of the People, which gives the Stamp to Writings calculated for Publick Entertainment; so, were we to trace the Evil, I am here exposing, to it's first Source, and charge the Indecency of *Immodest Plays*, on those who

write them ; the *Poets* perhaps in their Excuse, would plead, that they were compelled by Necessity, they wrote for Bread, and therefore, they were necessarily forced to oblige their Patrons, to gratify the prevailing Passion, though at the Expence of Virtue and Decency itself :—— The *Managers* of the Play-Houses who admit these infamous Productions, would urge for themselves, that they were under the same Obligations to their Spectators, and for the very same Reasons, and therefore, must always be ready to *please the Town*, whatever may be the Sacrifice :—— The *Players* would tell us, that as they are almost entirely under the Direction of their Employers, and consequently, unavoidably forced to personate just such Sort of Characters as they assign them ; they therefore think themselves but little culpable in the Affair ; and thus, at
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this Rate, the Blame at last will fall upon the *Town* in general, or those who frequent these Immodest Plays, and Poet, Manager and Player, will alike expect us to acquit them:— But alas, Excuses of this Sort, where the Morals of a Nation are at Stake, are by no Means to be admitted, however plausible they may at first appear, since nothing is more evident, than that the several Persons here referred to, are all greatly criminal, tho' perhaps in different Degrees.— The Poet no doubt may be considered, as the *First*, the *Principal* Agent; the Manager is intitled to a *Second* Share of Guilt, while the Player, it is confessed, is the *Last*, and *Least*, in the scandalous Combination.— In short, there can be no adequate Excuse for *Doing Wrong*: Men can by no Means be pardonable, who pursue their own Interests, by Measures impious and immoral,

moral, nor should any, however circumstanced, carry their Regards either for themselves or others, to greater Lengths, than Virtue and Morality will justify or warrant.—— Thus much I could not help hinting, with Respect to Poet, Manager and Player, the grand Instruments of Vice, in the Case of immodest Plays ; though it is not my Design at present, professedly to apply to either, for the Redress of the Enormity in Question. It is in the Power of any of them, 'tis certain, effectually to remove the Grievance, by withholding their Service and Assistance ; but at this Time, I have another Scheme in View, since the *Publick*, no Doubt, after all, are sufficiently able to prevent the Mischiefs arising either from the *Writing* or *Performance*, of immodest Plays.—— To the Town then, I now apply : —— 'Tis in the Power of the Publick, to remove the Charge of abetting the Cause of

of Bawdry and Obscenity, by discovering, for the future, juster Notions, and a more refined Taste, by discountenancing every Representation, which tends in the least to the Ridicule of Decency, and the Discredit of Innocence and Chastity.

But as Remonstrances to the Public in general, are now-a-days of little Avail, I shall for once make an Experiment, and considering the *Ladies*, as Beings endowed with Reason and Liberty, and therefore Accountables, confine myself on this Occasion to *Them* alone.—However the Men may laugh at Character and Reputation, and however slight the Obligations to Chastity, in a libertine Age, may be considered with Regard to *Them* *, yet the *Women* surely are in Earnest, on these important Points ; nor has any *Philosopher*,
I hope,

* See Mr. *Hume's Human Nature*.

I hope, yet appeared, hardy and learned enough to prove that Virtue in *Them* is unnecessary.——To the *Ladies* therefore, I would here be understood to address myself:——*They* are always ready to attend to the Voice of Reason, and ever judge with Candour, Coolness, and Impartiality.——It is in their Power to put a Stop to this National Reproach, and to prevent for the future, the Performance of an indecent Play.——It is for their Interests I am now more particularly concerned, and in their Service more especially engaged.

That Modesty is the grand, the principal Ornament of the Fair, none surely, but the abandoned of the Sex, will deny: Every Woman is ambitious of being accounted virtuous, as well in Thought and in Word, as in Action.—A Lady's Character and Reputation is considered, *deservedly* considered, as a Treasure inesti-

ineestimable, and to asperse or defame it, without a Cause, is committing an Injury which cannot be repaired.— *To filch from her her good Name, is robbing her of that which makes her poor indeed.*

—The more valuable the Possession, the greater Care and Circumspection are required to maintain and secure it: Now how far Women who voluntarily and *knowingly* attend an indecent Play, give Occasion for Scandal, and *really* deserve it, is a Point, which it would well become them to consider.— Circumstances and Appearances are all the *Data* from which we can possibly form any adequate Judgment, one of another: 'Tis the Behaviour alone which discovers the Heart, and therefore, those who frequent immodest Plays undoubtedly give but too much Reason to imagine, that their Thoughts are not so perfectly delicate, or so absolutely pure as might be wished.—I am very unwilling to believe, that the Ladies my Cotemporaries,

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are more loosely inclined than those of earlier Ages ; but really, when I hear of Plays which are big with Obscenity, being performed Night after Night, to crowded Houses, I am almost tempted to suspect that the whole Female World, either are or would be Prostitutes.—

What could it be, but an Approbation of the Sentiments of the Drama, which could induce such Multitudes of Women to flock so frequently, the Beginning of the last Season *, to *The Chances*, a Play, which in a well regulated State, would never have been suffered to make its Appearance, or if it had appeared, a Play, which the public Resentment should have *damned*, on its first Performance ?—— What reasonable Excuse can Women give for being present at a Representation, where every Scene and Speech is so scandalously licentious, and where the whole Plot and Design seems calculated to persuade them, that
a Wife

a *Wife* is a less eligible Character than a *Mistress*?—In short, thus much we may conclude universally with the *Tatler*, that, *Whenever we see any Thing divert an Audience, either in Tragedy or Comedy, that strikes at the Duties of civil Life, or exposes what the best Men in all Ages have looked upon as sacred and inviolable, it is the certain Sign of a Profligate Race of Men, who are fallen from the Virtue of their Forefathers, and will be contemptible in the Eyes of their Posterity.*—For my own Part, I am shocked when I reflect on the wretched Depravity of Taste, among the Ladies, in these Particulars, and on the Indecency of their Behaviour.—A Woman must surely be insensible to Shame and Modesty who can sit with Satisfaction, while Virgin Innocence or plighted Honour are made the Butts of low Wit and impious Buffoonry; she must forget the Dignity of her Sex, and disclaim all Pretensions

to Taste and Delicacy.—— The Hero of a Modern Comedy, what is he, but a pretty Fellow, who with great Gallantry and Politesse, very genteely cuckold his Friend, or debauches his Friend's Daughter? Now to hear a Woman applaud such a Character as this, is it not melancholy indeed?—— If we look into the Works of many of our dramatic Writers, we shall find that the great End of their Plays, is generally to ridicule the sober solid Satisfactions of the married Couple, and to laugh at, and despise every social Duty.

Intrigue is Plot, Obscenity is Wit.

S. JOHNSON.

And are such Plays as these fit for Women of Character to appear at?— 'Tis a Reflection on common Sense to suppose it.—— Decency, Propriety, and Decorum, all forbid it; and she who countenances Plays of this Immodest
Cast

Cast, by appearing at their Performance, deserves, no Doubt, the severest Censure : Nor, to say the Truth, is it possible for a Woman to give a stronger Proof of her Temper and Complexion, than the Choice she makes in her Diversions ; and certainly if she can sit three Hours together, and attend to the luscious Scenes, with which the Generality of our Plays abound, she gives us all the Reason in the World to suspect, that she indulges in the Representation, and applauds it ; and after her Spirits have been thus raised, and all her softer Passions set on Fire, I should not at all wonder, if she should immediately fall an easy Sacrifice, to the artful Sollicitations, and pressing Importunities, of a sprightly and intriguing Gallant ; and as a celebrated *French* Writer very appositely expresses it, *directly put in Practice those instructive Lessons, with which the Performance*

formance had just before furnished her.*—

Human Nature, we know, at best, is frail, is fallible; the severest Virtue will necessarily have its unguarded Moments, even though we omit these artificial Incitements, and adventitious Provocatives.

—If we lead ourselves into Temptation, 'tis no Wonder if our Resolution fails us. — *Musick softens*, Company naturally awakes the Passions, the Sculpture, Imagery, and Painting of the Building, help to alarm; and when the Dress, Gestures, and Discourse of the Players, are all calculated with the same Design, and tend to the very same Point, 'tis easy to see the Consequence: —

The young Fellows, I take it for granted, after such lively and spirited Representations, generally adjourn to *H——s*, or the *S——r*, to conclude the Evening; and how many *Lucretias*, we should find among the Ladies (or rather how

* *Boileau's Satires*, Sat. X. V. 147.

few) I appeal to their own Bosoms to determine.

But my Female Readers, I am apprehensive, will think me severe and unreasonable in these Remonstrances, and in Answer to this heavy Charge, very probably complain, That if they are to shun the Theatres, till the Performance of a Play, strictly chaste, Farewell for ever to *Drury-Lane*, and *Covent-Garden*. A Moment's Reflection will convince them, that this would be far from being the Case; since if all the Women in *London*, of Character and Reputation, would but resolve to absent themselves from the Play-Houses, the very first Time an indecent Play is acted, I will venture to affirm, that Bawdry and Obscenity would immediately be banished the Stage:—The Managers, always studious to oblige the Publick, would then exhibit nothing but Moral Pieces, and would ever prefer a chaste
Drama

Drama and a full House, to an indecent Play and an empty House.—The Thing speaks for itself, even though *Garrick* had not expressly told us so,

*Ab! let not Censure term our Fate our Choice,
The Stage but ecchoes back the publick Voice.
The Drama's Law, the Drama's Patrons give;
For we that live to please, must please to live.*

Prologue on Opening Drury-
Lane Theatre 1747.

I lament the Scarcity of modest Plays, and am sorry to find, that so many of our Dramatick Writers, have employed their Talents to such unworthy Purposes ; however, their's was the Profit, and their's will be the Punishment ; since surely, *if there be any chosen Curses, any hidden Thunders, in the Stores of Heaven, red with uncommon Wrath, they'll blast the Man*, who has thus infamously prostituted his Genius, to the Services of Vice and Impiety :— But yet, though the Generality of our Plays are a Scandal to the Stage which admits them, some there are, though few, where Virtue

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is dressed in agreeable Colours, and Decency and good Manners proposed as worthy Imitation. — At Representations of this Sort, may our Theatres be crowded; and our Actors applauded! — May the Ladies patronize the Stage, when it is the School of Virtue, and only discourage and discountenance it, when it becomes the Mart of Ribaldry, Obscenity, and Profaneness!

If our Ladies are really what they would be thought, that is, if they are really virtuous, let me advise them, for their own Characters and Reputation, to put a Stop to the Abuse in Question. — The Season is now advanced, in which the Theatres again are opened, and therefore Decency and Virtue must again be ridiculed, unless they kindly interpose in their Behalf. — It is evidently in their Power to prevent these Insults on Innocence and Modesty for the future; and if they do not, their Neglect is criminal; they are Accessaries in the Enormity, and answerable for the

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Effects

Effects, since, to connive at, is to abet.—
 The Ladies, in their own Persons, always
 compose a very considerable Part of the
 Audience ; and how many Gentlemen
 they carry with them, either directly or
 indirectly, the Managers would learn, by
 dear-bought Experience, were they to
 leave it. Now who sees not, that the Con-
 sequence of this, would necessarily be,
 that such Plays alone would be acted,
 as were consistent with Virtue and Mo-
 rality; at which every Woman in the
 Kingdom might appear, with Innocence,
 Decency and Propriety?

A Nation's Taste depends on You.

— Perhaps a Nation's Virtue too.

O think how glorious 'twere to raise

A Theatre to Virtue's Praise.

Where no indignant Blush might rise,

Nor Wit be taught to plead for Vice;

But every young attentive Ear

Imbibe the Precepts living there.

And every unexperienc'd Breast

There feel it's own rude Hints express'd,

And,

*And, waken'd by the glowing Scene,
Unfold the Worth that lurks within.*

WHITEHEAD.

Why should I enlarge? — Words cannot be necessary : — The Thing carries its own Evidence with it. — We discover our Approbation of a Play, by being present at the Performance of it, our Dislike by neglecting it; how shocking then is it to think, that the Ladies themselves, instead of being the Guardians of Virtue, are the Betrayers of it; and that instead of shunning the Play-House, when an indecent Play is acted, they then most crowd it. — I am loth to believe, that it is Inclination or Design that carries them thither, at such improper Seasons, and would candidly charge it on thoughtless Levity, and Want of Consideration : — If this is the Case, it will give me great Pleasure that I have pointed out the Mistake. — Enough, I think, has been said, to prove

that it is a Mistake, and a Mistake too, however lightly they may have hitherto considered it, of a most fatal Tendency. — It throws down all Distinctions between what is becoming, and what is not so, and weakens the very Foundations of Shame and Modesty.

If the Ladies have any Regard for the Interests of Decency and Chastity, for themselves, or their Reputation, let me prevail on them ever to avoid the Theatres, when Virtue is insulted, and Female Modesty derided; let them no longer give a Sanction to Smut and Ribaldry, or patronize, in so undisguised a Manner, the Cause of profane Drollery, or abandoned Impudence. — Let them exert themselves on this important Occasion, with proper Spirit and Resolution, and endeavour at the Removal of this national Reproach, — The Evil, we see, is great, the greater will be their Merit who reform it; The Method is plain
and

and easy, and to attempt it, is to succeed.
 — Honour, Fame, and Reputation are
 all concerned, every Thing dear and valu-
 able to them, as Women, is at Stake.

Be persuaded then, ye Fair, to em-
 ploy the Means, so evidently in your
 Power, for reforming this reigning Abuse,
 this publick Scandal; and to the *Im-*
mortal Honour of the Women of the
 present Age, may the ensuing Winter,
 of *Seventeen Hundred and Fifty-six*, stand
 distinguished in *British Annals*, as the
 glorious *Æra*, when Bawdry and Obsce-
 nity were banished the publick Stage,
 when these *rank Weeds* were rooted from
 the Soil, where they had long flourished,
 and to the *Eternal Infamy* of their
 Abettors, long threatened the Destruction
 of Virtue, Truth, and Innocence.

'Tis Your's this Year to bid the Reign commence
 Of rescu'd Nature, and reviving Sense;

To

*To chase the Charms of Sound, the Pomp of Show,
 For useful Mirth, and salutary Woe :
 Bid scenic Virtue form the Rising Age,
 And Truth diffuse her Radiance from the Stage.*

S. JOHNSON.

THE END.

